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Mark Serwotka: “I am proud of what we’ve achieved, but the campaign must continue”

In an interview with Mark Serwotka after he announced his retirement, our General Secretary explained how far the union has come, the wider significance of the ongoing national dispute, and why he believes we should continue the campaign.

PCS People: What’s the current situation for PCS?

Mark Serwotka: The union is in the best place it has been for at least a decade.

We are getting over the 50% ballot thresholds, we have 10,000 more members than last year, and we have a national industrial action strategy that is getting money to members.

PP: How significant is this progress?

MS: We should pause for a moment to think about what this means.

Over the last two decades that I’ve been general secretary, even going back to the two decades before that when I was an activist, we’ve seen successive governments make a political project of reducing the standing of the civil service in relation to the rest of the public sector, and the private sector.

We’ve scored some massive national victories over the government but it’s almost always been through legal action, such as on check-off and the Civil Service Compensation Scheme (CSCS).

Industrially we’ve won some fantastic strikes, but they’ve usually been at employer or branch level.

So we entered this national campaign in an incredibly difficult position, with years and years of erosion of pay and terms of conditions that had put us at the bottom of the league, governments that used their own workforce to set a bad example,

and a cost-of-living crisis that meant civil servants were in real poverty. The challenge for the union was that the stakes were so high, failure was not an option.

PP: How did the union come up with an effective strategy?

MS: Our experiences had taught us what was needed to galvanise the union, and everyone should be immensely proud of the way they pulled in the same direction to win the ballot in so many areas.

More importantly, to win an outcome, we learned that one or two-day national strikes were only enough to protest. We listened to members, who wanted to fight but couldn't afford long periods of unpaid action. So we came up with the strategy that everyone pays into the levy so we could pull people out on targeted strikes with the most impact, then have periodic national strikes, ideally with other unions.

We knew that to achieve something we had to be dogged. And that's what we did. After six months, we've spent £6m on strike pay, raised over £3m via the levy, had hundreds of days of targeted strike action and three massively well-supported national strikes. This campaign has shown us, more than ever, our potential. The government knows we can keep the pressure on. We have forced them into decisions they categorically ruled out for over a year – they said they had no more money than 2%, they shut down talks on 2022/23 pay and said there would be no one-off payment.

To be in this position is a historic achievement. It's an incredibly important moment that everybody should be proud of. It's not a knockout victory, we haven't been offered all we want, but we mustn't lose sight of where we've come from.

That is how I look at the last 20-30 years and what we've managed to pull off this time.

PP: What do you think of the concessions made and where we go from here?

MS: There are lots of shortcomings to this pay offer, in particular pro rata lump sum payments for part-time workers, which we are continuing to campaign on. But it's the first time in my PCS life that our national strike action has put money in members' pockets. It gives us broad parity with other parts of the public sector, and will deliver more than 5% for our lowest paid members in some big

departments.

And the guarantees on CSCS are a huge win that's been a little lost in these discussions.

We can be proud of what we've achieved, but the campaign must continue. It would be a fatal mistake to overblow what we've gained, because people don't have any time for that. But we should recognise the achievement.

Members I have spoken to do recognise that we've only won what we've got because of the action we've taken. I don't think we should lose sight of that fact.

And the concessions can't be dismissed. A couple I worked with in the DWP told me the impact of the £1,500 was that they were booking their first holiday in six years.

However, I understand when people tell us it's not enough because we have to remember our members are in a terrible place. I know why they want consolidated inflation-busting pay increases and they didn't want a one-off lump sum.

I don't think it's enough. Any serious union would do a sober analysis, looking across the whole union, about the next steps.

We've come to the conclusion, and this is what members will be balloted on, that we should pause the strike action, go into talks with employers on the 2023/24 pay round, then judge the outcomes against inflation and against the public sector pay review awards. If the talks fail to deliver, we can ballot and take action again if members agree.

PP: Could we end up going on strike again?

MS: We would be well placed to take more industrial action. The picket lines I went on were more diverse and younger than we've ever seen. People were almost feeling joyous and liberated.

The sheer numbers showed the confidence flowing through members. The thing that strikes me most is that you can't put that back in the jar.

That why it's so exciting. The real legacy of this dispute is that the union is stronger industrially than ever before. We have all mounted a campaign that's delivered something for members. We should recognise it as an achievement because on the back of that you can achieve more in the future.

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